

BURUNDI 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, and groups generally practiced their religion without government interference. Police, however, forcibly prevented a Catholic splinter group from making a monthly pilgrimage to a Virgin Mary shrine, resulting in 10 dead, 35 injured, and the conviction of 182 pilgrims, of which 32 received prison sentences. The government prosecuted three policemen in connection with the deaths and injuries in a case that remained pending at the end of the year.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The Roman Catholic Church sought government assistance in blocking visits by the splinter group to the site where the group believed there were apparitions of the Virgin Mary.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged the government and societal leaders to continue to support broad-based religious tolerance. Embassy efforts included hosting an iftar and encouraging interfaith discussion of social and economic challenges.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.8 million (July 2013 estimate). Although reliable statistics are not available, religious leaders estimate approximately 60 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, while 20 percent belongs to indigenous religious groups and 15 percent to Protestant groups. Muslims constitute 2 to 5 percent of the population, and live mainly in urban areas. Most Muslims are Sunni, although some are Shia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The law covering nonprofit organizations is the basis for recognition and registration of religious groups, which must register with the interior ministry. Each religious group must provide the denomination or affiliation of the

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institution, a copy of its bylaws, the address of its headquarters in the country, an address abroad if the local institution is a subsidiary, and the names and addresses of the association's governing body and legal representative. Registration also entails identifying any property and bank accounts owned by the religious group. The ministry usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. A representative of a religious group who fails to comply can be jailed for six months to five years.

The law does not grant tax exemptions to religious groups.

Government Practices

The government, at the request of the Catholic Church, forcibly prevented a Catholic splinter group from making a monthly pilgrimage to a site where a woman reported seeing regular apparitions of the Virgin Mary. There were repeated monthly confrontations between police and the pilgrims, and in clashes in March, 10 pilgrims died and 35 were injured. Police stated they started shooting after the pilgrims stoned them. Three policemen were arrested and were prosecuted in connection with the deaths and injuries in a case that remained pending at the end of the year. In April a court convicted 182 pilgrims for "civil disobedience" for visiting the shrine. Most of the pilgrims were released within a few days, but 32 were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six months to five years.

The government administration comprised both Christian and Muslim officials. The president was a Christian, while several prominent members of his cabinet were Muslim.

The finance ministry often granted waivers of taxes on religious articles or goods that religious groups imported for social development purposes.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In March Catholic Church leaders urged the government to prevent the excommunicated splinter group that believed in apparitions of the Virgin Mary from making its monthly pilgrimages to the shrine where the apparitions were reported to occur. The Catholic Church believed that the apparitions were false and told the group that it should either stop making the claims or stop representing itself as Catholic.

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Freedom of religion was a strongly held principle in society. Members of different faiths lived and worked together in harmony.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives promoted religious freedom and encouraged government officials and others to continue to support broad-based religious tolerance. Embassy staff engaged the government and the Catholic Church concerning government actions against the Catholic splinter group's pilgrims. Embassy staff also established and sustained communications with religious leaders and encouraged meetings between Christian and Muslim groups to exchange views and enhance interfaith dialogue. The embassy hosted an iftar in order to further religious dialogue.